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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001739

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: EVEN AFTER DEADLY CLASH, GOVERNMENT AFFIRMS
SUPPORT FOR PEACE WITH MUSLIM REBELS

REF: A. MANILA 1715 (MILITARY LAUNCHES MAJOR STRIKE
AGAINST BASILAN TERRORISTS)
[1](#)B. MANILA 1575 (INFORMAL PEACE TALKS)
[1](#)C. MUSLIM GROUP SEEKS DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE)
[1](#)D. MANILA 1568 (SUSPENSION OF MILITARY OPERATIONS
AGAINST MUSLIM REBELS)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney,
reasons 1.4 (a), (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: President Arroyo affirmed her commitment August 15 to the renewed peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), despite the involvement of some MILF fighters in the deaths of nearly two dozen Philippine soldiers last week in a military operation against terrorists on Basilan island. President Arroyo's statements echoed her July discussions in Washington, where she committed to undertake a renewed peace process with the separatist Muslim rebels even as she aggressively pursued shared counterterrorism goals. Senior Cabinet officials said they did not expect the deadly incident -- in which ASG members aided by some MILF fighters killed 23 soldiers -- to obstruct the reconvening of peace talks. Government and MILF negotiators said they were continuing preparatory work on the creation of an international contact group and the protection of civilians in conflict-affected areas. The military commander in charge of the Basilan operation told the Ambassador August 17 that the government would remain focused on peace talks even as the military continued to advance in Basilan and target terrorists on Jolo island. As parties continue down the path toward peace talks, opinion-makers and politicians in the aftermath of the Basilan incident have highlighted MILF's association with the ASG, calling into question the rebel group's commitment to the peace process and the ongoing ceasefire. END SUMMARY.

WORK FOR PEACE, BUT "WIPE OUT" TERRORISTS

[1](#)2. (C) President Arroyo maintained her commitment to restarting the peace process with the Muslim rebel group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), despite the involvement of some MILF fighters on the side of Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists in an August 12 military operation on Basilan island. Twenty-three Philippine Marines were killed in the early morning operation, mostly in an MILF ambush. Peace Process Adviser Secretary Avelino Razon indicated that the peace process would not be affected by the Basilan incident, a comment echoed by Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro. But Teodoro also stressed that President Arroyo had instructed the military to "wipe out" the ASG and other terrorists. Demonstrating the emotional impact of the military loss, President Arroyo visited Zamboanga City August 15 to console the families of soldiers who were killed. Though the operation was costly in military terms, Philippine military sources continue to say the fighting resulted in the deaths of both ASG and affiliated MILF members, possibly including some high value targets.

PHILIPPINE MILITARY LOOKING AHEAD

13. (C) In an August 17 conversation with the Ambassador, who was on Basilan and Tawi Tawi islands to launch USAID development projects and discuss U.S.-assisted counterterrorism efforts, Western Mindanao Command chief Major General Benjamin Dolorfino said he was saddened to lose so many soldiers in one operation, but insisted that the fight would go on. The military planned to clear out the ASG-occupied areas of Basilan and was prepared to then move to the larger neighboring island of Jolo to fight more significant concentrations of ASG and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists. The military had a solid game plan, he contended, with sufficient troop levels and a good field commander on the ground. Dolorfino, though focused on military engagement, agreed that peace talks with the MILF were vital, and said that it was important to separate the actions of the rogue groups from the core MILF.

PEACE PROCESS PREPARATORY WORK CONTINUES

14. (C) An official at the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process told the Embassy August 17 that preparatory work for peace talks was continuing, unaffected by the clash on Basilan. Government and MILF peace panels were preparing recommendations for the remaining two items outlined in the parties' July 29 joint statement: the creation of an international contact group and the protection of civilians in conflict-affected areas. The government, the

MANILA 00001739 002 OF 002

official noted, would file a formal complaint about the MILF's Basilan attack through the Joint Ceasefire Committee, which was prepared to dispatch fact-finding teams to Basilan to begin a formal investigation. MILF spokesperson Eid Kabalu noted that the MILF would also file its own complaint to the Committee for the military's "misbehavior" which it claims caused the deaths of 10 MILF fighters.

PUBLIC OPINION AND OFFICIALS QUESTION MILF'S ROLE

15. (U) As facts about the August 12 Basilan operation emerge, Manila's opinion-makers are beginning to raise questions about the MILF's role in repelling and ultimately killing government troops -- and are questioning the MILF's commitment to the peace process. A hard-hitting opinion piece in one daily argued August 17 that the complex clan relationships in Basilan are no excuse for the MILF to ignore the collusion between some members of the ASG and MILF, which could impact the peace process: "If you want peace, why didn't you prevent the ambush?" Senator Rodolfo Biazon, going further in remarks to the press, pointedly questioned whether the peace process could be maintained in its current form.

COMMENT

16. (C) In the aftermath of the bloody Basilan operation, the peace process machinery shows no signs of slowing down. With a cautious sense of renewed optimism among both government and MILF peace panel members, both parties appear to be moving forward on the work prescribed in the July 29 joint statement. Still, the latest incident highlights the difficulties MILF leaders face in controlling their most independent elements, such as those operating on Basilan. MG Dolorfino, in his position just over one month, seemed in command and at ease in his conversation with the Ambassador. He noted that he hoped to soon place a deputy in charge of the Sulu Archipelago, though he was facing opposition from members of the Philippine Congress who charged that his preferred choice, Brigadier Natalio Ecarma, was too close to

provincial governors there.
KENNEY